

Draft!

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EUSA conference 2011, Boston

The Bologna Process as an Instance of Strategic Europeanisation – the Role of the European Commission

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1 – Introduction

Higher education is a contested area. It is contested because it is still deeply rooted in a national or even in a regional environment highlighted by the legal competence being a prerogative of the national or subnational level – and not the European level. Yet, at the same time higher education and its major institutional manifestations in the form of universities do have an inherent dimension that goes well beyond such narrowly defined borders. They almost require the international dimension for their ‘well-being’.

A few centuries ago this dimension was expressed by students travelling to different universities in different parts of Europe to maximise the benefits of their education (at a time, though, when a university degree was only an option for a small minority, sharing Latin as their universal teaching language). Nowadays the international element finds one of its most visible manifestations in the international university rankings (‘Times Higher Education World University Ranking’ or ‘Shanghai Ranking’ to name just two).

Rankings do not only represent internationality, they also stand for an increased economic competition. It is in particular this aspect that provides the ground for the European Union (EU), or more precisely the European Commission, to get involved in a policy area that was not long ago perceived as not being part of its portfolio.

Against this background this paper will try to demonstrate the manner in which the European Commission has been able to assume a pivotal role in European higher education. This will be done by looking at the first tentative forays in this area that remained largely unsuccessful. It will be followed by an examination of the insinuation of the Commission into the intergovernmental and extra-EU Bologna process and by taking into consideration the development of the (limited) higher education dimension of the Lisbon strategy.

The analysis will highlight the emergence of an overarching policy matrix, in which the Commission has been able strategically to place itself as a central actor.

2 – Towards a European Higher Education

The Bologna process stands not at the beginning of European dimension of Higher Education. Its roots go further back and are closely related to the development of the European integration process and one of its advocates, the European Commission.

The European integration process has its origins in a primarily economic dimension as witnessed by the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951 by the Treaty of Paris. The rather narrowly defined economic dimension widened considerably of the following decades and with the deepening of the European integration came also the focus on other fundamental aspects of the foundation of societies such as education or more specifically higher education. Yet, the problem was that educational matters – and with it higher education – rested almost exclusively with the competence of the member states of the EU.

One way out of this situation for the European Union or more precisely the European Commission, was to focus on voluntary cooperation. A result of this approach was the introduction in 1987 of the ERASMUS student exchange program, a legally non-binding initiative by the Commission (approved by the Council of Ministers) that “depends solely on cooperation of academic institutions willing to participate” (Demmelhuber, 2003: 44).

The Erasmus program proved to be quite successful and paved the way for the further development.

In 1991 the Commission produced a “Memorandum on higher Education in the European Community” in which the importance of higher education for the economic, social and cultural development of the Community is emphasised. As a consequence, the Commission demanded from the member states more convergence and common action for the higher education sector. Almost all reactions from the member states were negative and emphasised that higher education was their (cultural) prerogative and denied the Commission any competence for that area that was ‘protected’ by the principle of subsidiarity (Friedrich, 2005: 119; Hahn, 2004: 37-8).

Despite that rejecting attitude only one year later the Maastricht Treaty “recognized for the first time the EU’s responsibility to promote cooperation in education between European countries” (Mora and Felix, 2009: 195). However, the emphasis of the treaty provision (Article 126) is on ‘encouraging cooperation’ and not on initiating a legally binding European higher education policy. Hence, the sovereignty of the member states was still respected and the treaty therefore did initially not stimulate a new dimension in European higher education.

The next substantial step towards a European higher education came in 1997 with the Lisbon convention ‘on the recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the

European Region’. Although the recognition of degrees was also an issue in the Maastricht Treaty, the Convention was actually initiated by the Council of Europe and UNESCO. Subsequently, the document became the most important legal instrument for the recognition of higher education degrees (Reichert and Tauch, 2003: 9) – and actually the only legally binding instrument of Bologna.

Only one year after the Lisbon convention, the Sorbonne declaration was signed on the 25th of May 1998 by the (higher) education ministers of the ‘core’ countries of the EU (France, Great Britain, Italy and Germany). The other EU member states (eleven at that time) were not particularly pleased by this isolated move (Friedrich, 2005: 115) but the development one year later – the signing of the Bologna declaration – leave the impression that the feeling of being left outside did not last too long.

It is worth mentioning here that Sorbonne refers directly to the Lisbon convention and demands the establishment of some common structures (e.g to promote mobility to study abroad) and the creation of a ‘European area of higher education’ while at the same time underlining the need to respect “our diversities” and pointing out that “our governments ... continue to have a significant role to play to these ends”. This emphasis of the responsibility of the individual states probably also helped to calm down the other EU members – and could be portrayed as a visible expression for the exclusion of the European Commission.

In any case, the Europeanisation process of higher education continued to accelerate. The Bologna declaration of 1999 thereby only marked a more visible step of something that had already started before. Yet, the resulting Bologna process further accelerated the Europeanisation of higher education and provided the European Commission – after a delayed start – with the opportunity to take on a prominent role.

2.1 – The Bologna Process

When the Bologna declaration was signed in 1999 by twenty-nine countries (including all 15 EU member states), the document made explicit reference to the Sorbonne declaration and specified six areas of cooperation, essentially tied to the comparability of degree structures and mobility:

- Adoption of easily readable and comparable degrees (including a Diploma Supplement)
- Adoption of a degree system based on two main cycles
- Establishment of a credit points system (comparable to the existing ECTS)

- Promotion of mobility of students, researchers and administrative personnel
- Promotion of cooperation in Quality assurance on a European level
- Promotion of the European dimension in higher education

In the following years the process was governed by the regular holding of ministerial follow-up conferences usually every two years (see Table 1)¹ leading to both, a substantive expansion and a geographical expansion.

Table 1: Stages of the Bologna Process

1997	Lisbon Convention	51 ratifications/accessions (25.02.2011)
1998	Sorbonne Declaration	F, GB, IT and DE
1999	Bologna Declaration	29 Countries
2001	Prague Communiqué	32 Countries
2003	Berlin Communiqué	40 Countries
2005	Bergen Communiqué	45 Countries
2007	London Communiqué	46 Countries
2009	Leuven Communiqué	46 Countries
2010	Budapest-Vienna Declaration	47 Countries
2012	<i>Bucharest</i>	...

Source: data from original documents

Without going into the details of the additional areas of cooperation, it is worth pointing out one aspect: In Berlin (2003) it was for the first time sought to link the teaching and research dimension of higher education into a more comprehensively defined whole:

Conscious of the need to promote closer links between the EHEA [European Higher Education Area] and the ERA [European Research Area] in a Europe of Knowledge, and of the importance of research as an integral part of higher education across Europe, Ministers consider it necessary to go beyond the present focus on two main cycles of higher education to include the doctoral level as the third cycle in the Bologna Process. (Berlin Communiqué)

¹ An exception was the meeting leading to the Budapest-Vienna declaration. It was in 2010, the year which was given in the Prague Communiqué of 2001 as the year by which the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was supposed to have been established. Whether this was actually the case and whether the (overly) ambitious goal had been achieved cannot be answered here. In any case, the communiqué celebrates the launch of the EHEA.

Despite the reference to the ERA, the central focus of Bologna remains on learning and teaching and less on research. Even the doctoral education does not represent an exception to this logic. By referring to it as the third cycle in the degree structure it appears to be closer to the Anglo-American model of doctoral education than for example to the German understanding of the status of a doctoral student. As a consequence the meaning of the third cycle as a bridge to research appears to be of less relevance (Keller, 2005: 75).

In terms of its geographical expansion Bologna now represents a process whose membership extends well beyond the EU and the geographical Europe. While a marginal majority of Bologna is still made up of EU member states the balance between EU and non-EU has been given more formal recognition in Leuven in 2009. There it was agreed that the chair of the process would be shared by the country holding the EU presidency and a non-EU member state.

In the context of this argument it is worth mentioning that the European Commission received in 2001 the status of a member with voting rights. In effect this means that the Commission is now a full member of the Bologna Process.

While the issues surrounding the accession of the Commission to the process will be looked at further down, it is at this stage important to emphasise another aspect of Bologna: The declaration and communiqués are only the end result of lengthy meetings and discussions which start more or less immediately after one ministerial meeting is over. The necessary ‘heavy lifting’ between the interministerial conferences is done by the ‘Bologna Follow-Up Group’ (BFUG) in semi-annual plenaries and through the work of a more restricted executive board.

Overall the development in European higher education can be described as something that was initially (Sorbonne) characterised by a loose intergovernmental coordination. The Bologna Declaration led to a more definite shape of the process. However, even the current state of the process is still very lightly institutionalised. There seems to be an inherent resistance to establish any form of permanent secretariat. This function is still normally performed by the host country of the next interministerial conference.²

² The official Bologna process website (www.ehea.info), though, is now a permanent website and does not change anymore after a ministerial meeting.

Bologna is also a process that is basically legally non-binding (with the exception of the Lisbon convention; see above). One scholar, Sacha Garben (2010) has therefore criticised the process from the point of view of an ‘EU law orthodoxy’ as having pre-empted action which could have been adopted within the narrower EU context. Or in the words of an official from the Commission, summarising Garben’s thesis in a more provocative manner: Bologna should have been a directive!³ Yet, the conflict potential of Bologna, as witnessed over the last few years in form of students protesting against what they perceived as result of the Bologna process, would probably not have benefited from such an EU approach.⁴ Yet, as has already been said above, Bologna is not a process of the EU. This, however, applies to the Lisbon strategy. And to fully understand the role of the Commission in the Bologna process it is necessary to take into consideration this strategy.⁵

2.2 – The Lisbon strategy

In March 2000 the European Council came together for a special meeting in Lisbon to agree, amongst other things, on “a new strategic goal for the Union in order to strengthen employment, economic reform and social cohesion as part of a knowledge-based economy”. Ultimately, the ambition was “to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world” (European Council, 2000).

Lisbon is more than just higher education or as one former member of the European Commission puts it: “Lisbon is everything; Lisbon is an abbreviation for the whole economic and social political development of the EU”.⁶ And while the dimension of knowledge production was central to the document, higher education was not a central theme and was further more centred more on research than on learning and teaching. As a consequence Bologna was not directly mentioned in the document of the Lisbon strategy even if some reference were made to central issues of the Bologna declaration (e.g. mobility of students and researchers).

³ Interview in Brussels, 03.02.2011.

⁴The last two ministerial meetings (2009 Leuven and 2010 Vienna/Budapest) were marked by significant student demonstrations. However, there seems to be a tendency in the current student protests to focus more on the financial dimension of current developments and thereby more directly on the national governments (see e.g.: Die Zeit, 2011).

⁵ Also referred to as Lisbon agenda or Lisbon process.

⁶ Interview, 28.01. 2011

That Bologna was somehow ignored in 2000 by the Council might come as a surprise from nowadays perspective. Yet, at the time of the Lisbon meeting, the Bologna document was only about nine months old. Maybe too early to fully realise the impact the Bologna process would have in the coming years. From a different perspective it might have also been simply the result of the different sizes of the projects: Lisbon as the “large matrix” almost dwarfed the Bologna aspirations which were therefore overlooked.⁷ In addition, the EU was simply lacking the legal competence in areas of higher education.⁸

When the driving force behind the Lisbon strategy, the European Commission, joined Bologna as a member with voting rights in 2001 (see above) the situation changed and Bologna became also an issue for the Lisbon strategy. In 2003 the Commission produced a more focused paper on “The role of the universities in the Europe of Knowledge”. The paper does not present a recipe for that role, its ambition is rather to “start a debate” (Ibid.: 1) but what it does offer is a commitment of the Commission “to support and help to foster the Bologna process” (Ibid.: 11) – as part of the Lisbon strategy.

Despite such specific explanations to help achieve the general goals of the strategy Lisbon failed. An attempt to restart the agenda was marked in 2005 by a communication from the Commission: ‘Working together for growth and jobs. A new start for the Lisbon strategy’.⁹

Even though the Commission had acquired a more prominent role in the Bologna process there was again no particular mentioning of Bologna (except a reference to the EHEA) in the general document. But it was again the Commission (2005a) that corrected this impression of a limited importance of Bologna for Lisbon by producing a communication devoted exclusively to that topic only two months later (‘Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: enabling universities to make full contribution to the Lisbon strategy’) followed about a year later by an even more prominent statement regarding this topic (‘Delivering on the modernisation agenda for universities: education, research and innovation’). There is no question left in the 2006 Commission statement about the relevance of Bologna for Lisbon (Ibid.: 5): “**A major effort should be made to achieve the core Bologna reforms by 2010 in all EU countries**” (bold print in original).

⁷ Interview, 28.01. 2011

⁸ A method to overcome this lack of power in certain policy areas was introduced as part of the Lisbon strategy: the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). See for example: Ania and Wegener, 2009.

⁹ The reasons for the failed first attempt of Lisbon can be found in the Kok report of 2004 that was produced to evaluate the Lisbon strategy under the chair of the former Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok (High level group, 2004).

Regardless of these efforts, Lisbon (as a whole) was still struggling to achieve the objectives of its strategy.¹⁰ Ultimately, this led to the second restart of the project now under the new name of ‘Europe 2020’. The new approach of the Commission (2010a) was adopted by the European Council at its meeting in Brussels in June 2010. It is too early to comment on the new strategy (which would be the topic for a different paper). It is based on the Lisbon strategy but at the same time it displays some conceptual changes (Hummer, 2010). The targets (see Table 2), however, remained almost unchanged.

Table 2: The targets of the Europe 2020 strategy

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- 75% of the population aged 20-64 should be employed
 - 3% of the EU’s GDP should be invested in research and development
 - ‘20/20/20’ climate/energy targets should be met
 - Share of early school leavers should be under 10%
 - 40% of the young generation should have a tertiary degree
 - 20 million less people should be at risk of poverty
-

Source: European Commission (2010a)

While there is again no direct reference to Bologna in the document there is another communication by the Commission in preparation (expected for autumn 2011) that will deliver an updated version of the 2006 paper by the Commission on the modernisation agenda for universities.¹¹

The higher education dimension of Lisbon/Europe 2020 has a greater economic dimension than Bologna thereby reflecting the competence of the European Commission in this area. The increased engagement of the Commission in the Bologna process (Keeling, 2006) has therefore been described in various sources as the ‘Lisbonisation of Bologna’ (e.g.: Beerkens, 2008: 417; Haskel, 2009: 282) implying a resulting dominance of an economic agenda in Bologna. While the question of the dominance of economic aspects will not be answered here, the argument also implies a rather influential position of the Commission in Bologna.

The following analysis will look at the role of the Commission in the Bologna process combining analysis from existing literature with the results of interviews made with four

¹⁰ The Commission (2010) itself in a ‘staff working document’ pointed at the failure to reach the two main targets (i.e. employment rate of 70% and 3% of GDP spent on research and development). Yet, the Commission declined that this implied a failure of the strategy. Others, in contrast, speak of an outright failure of the Lisbon strategy (see for example: Hummer, 2010).

¹¹ Interview, 02-03.02.2011.

current and one former member of the European Commission (from the Directorate General (DG) Education and Culture and the DG Research and Innovation).¹²

3 – The role of the European Commission in the Bologna process

3.1 – No need for the European Commission?

The Sorbonne and Bologna declaration have been characterised as “purely intergovernmental actions” (Beerens, 2008: 417). Naturally, that would not imply the participation of the European Commission. Yet, given the content of the declarations and given the track record of the Commission regarding issues of European higher education (Erasmus, Maastricht treaty) it might have come as a bit of a surprise that the Commission did not receive a more prominent role at both occasions.

While it would go too far here to analyse all the reasons for the emergence of the Bologna process it should be noted that one driving force in the creation of Bologna was the Sorbonne declaration – or more precisely: the Attali (1998) report that led to the meeting at the Sorbonne university.

Jacques Attali was appointed by Claude Allègre, the French minister of education at that time, to look into a reform agenda for the French Higher Education system. Attali, an economist who held various political positions, recommended a European solution: As the title of the report already indicated (‘Pour un Modèle Européen d’enseignement supérieur’ – For a European model of higher education) he “anchored the need for French reforms in European developments” (Hoareau, 2010: 7). Yet, this did not imply a move away from the responsibility of the nation state or its stakeholders (Attali, 1998). This position was reflected in the Sorbonne declaration that seemed to have been characterised by the attitude that it should not look like Brussels – a situation that had not changed fundamentally one year later with the launch of the Bologna process.¹³

The actor ‘representing’ Brussels, the European commission, did not particularly like being excluded. It might even have felt alienated but this state did not last too long.¹⁴ After all, as all of the interviewee pointed out, the goals of the Bologna process were almost all taken from EU initiatives and here especially from the Erasmus program. One member of the

¹² Held between 28 January and 3 February 2011 in Bonn and Brussels

¹³ Interviews, 28.01 and 03.02.2011

¹⁴ Only one of the interviewee insisted that the Commission did not feel excluded at all

Commission who participated at the Bologna conference describes this fact as a “great compliment” for the European commission.¹⁵

In any case, the Commission was not absent from the meeting and tried to get into the process. This finally happened in 2001 arguably for two main reasons: First, the exclusion of the Commission was not based on a rejection of the Commission as such but more on the perception of some actors from the nation states that the goals of the process could better be reached without the involvement of Brussels (due to the sensitive nature of the topic). Second, as one interviewee put it, “a process stalls if no broker gets in”.¹⁶ This view that is based on what Barbara Haskell (2009: 274) characterises as the “implicit “demand” for leadership” as a result of an intergovernmental process “that ... quickly proved ineffective” (Ibid.) provided the ground for the accession of the Commission to Bologna. In other words: the broker to solve the situation and to institutionalise the process was the Commission. It had the financial and organisational resources to take on that position.

Most of the interviewees support this analysis and while one official tries to downplay the leadership implication by stating that “they [members of the Commission] do not want to monopolise things”, another senior member of the Commission states that “if the Commission would not have stepped in to provide the backup, the funding, the intellectual capacity for steering the process ... Bologna would not have been what it is right now”.¹⁷

From this perspective it almost appears natural that the European Commission, as a result of a proposal by Germany (Friedrich, 2005: 118), was taken on board in 2001 (Prague meeting) thereby overcoming the perception that the process would be better off without Brussels. However, that the Commission became a *full* member of the Bologna club (the only one which is not a state) and not an observer or a consultative member came as a surprise to at least one official of the Commission who attended that conference. For him it was something like an overreaction.¹⁸

In any case, there appeared to have been a need for the European Commission to take on a more pronounced role in the Bologna process. How the Commission filled this role will be the topic of the next section.

¹⁵ Interview,, 03.02.2011

¹⁶ Interview, 03.02.2011

¹⁷ Interviews, 02.-03.02.2011

¹⁸ Interview, 03.02.2011

3.2 – The impact of the European Commission

Even before the Commission joined the Bologna process it had an impact on the agenda. The adoption of the objectives of the Erasmus program for Bologna was only the most visible one. In addition, while the Commission was not a member of the process this did not imply that it was not involved at all. One member of the Commission therefore even denies the existence of a division between the time before and after 2001.¹⁹

This, however, certainly does not apply to the institutional setting of the Bologna process. As a reaction to the ‘institutionalisation deficit’ the Bologna follow-up group (BFUG) and a preparatory group were established in Prague, both with the purpose of preparing the following ministerial meeting. Both groups marked a significant step in the institutionalisation process of Bologna. The resulting structures were further developed in the following ministerial meeting providing the ground for an increase of the involvement and the power of the Commission (Veiga and Amaral, 2009: 143-5).

It appears that at the beginning the Commission was hesitating to take on a more prominent position. A situation that for Amaral and Neave (2009: 290) is not unusual and represents nothing more than an example “of the effective strategy Brussels employs” to get into policy areas that are more sensitive and more protected by the member states. According to this view, the Commission takes at first a low profile and then expands its role based on technical expertise and policy competence. For Bologna this meant that “the commission initially limited its scope to support actions – funding reports and projects associated with implementation, making itself useful in its special capacity to coordinated processes Europe-wide” (Ibid.). The success of this strategy was soon visible (Ibid.): “No great time elapsed before the commission became a major player in the Bologna process”. And the central instrument to achieve this was the BFUG.

When it comes to the view of the officials of the Commission interviewed for this paper about this analysis there is a general agreement on the importance of financial support given by the Commission to support Bologna. Yet, some of the interviewees emphasises that the financial resources are not imposed on the other stakeholders and that nobody is obliged to take the money provided for projects by the Commission. One former member of the Commission

¹⁹ Interview, 02.02.2011

admits, though, that the money is not available completely string-free by summarising: “He who pays the piper calls the tune”.²⁰

All of the interviewees denied a dominance of the Commission in the Bologna process. They either speak of a “soft role” or point out that the Commission is “not allowed to speak out in the same way Germany or France would be allowed to speak out”. Despite popular assumptions they do not see the “Commission pulling strings in the background”. The Commission has its objectives in Bologna but the process is neither a “deeply loved child” nor an “unloved child” resulting in a rather functional relationship.²¹

One interviewee also emphasises that there was a tendency at the beginning of Bologna not to mention the process in speeches and documents and that Bologna, due to the financial implications, sometimes was even seen by some as a ‘millstone around the commission’s neck’. It was not seen as a process of the EU.²² This, according to the ‘insider’ only started to change between 2003 and 2005 when Bologna was perceived as a useful vehicle for the own approach to reforms.²³ Visible expressions of this change in attitude are the European Commission’s documents on the role of the Universities in the Lisbon strategy (2003, 2005, 2006).

The changed perception of Bologna was probably also related to the actual functioning of the process and the resulting interaction. One senior member emphasises that “we [the Commission] don’t work in a vacuum, we don’t work in isolation. We have structured dialogues with all sorts of actors.”²⁴ The main platform for such interactions are the BFUG meetings and there is almost an agreement amongst the (former) representatives of the Commission that those meetings are generally characterised by a good atmosphere. An atmosphere that is, according to the descriptions, not dominated by the Commission but rather by long speeches of the stakeholders directly involved in the process.²⁵ The actual results, however, seems to be based to a substantial degree on direct contacts between individual actors and the resulting agreements. This raises of course the question of transparency which

²⁰ Interview, 28.01.2011

²¹ Interviews, 28.01.2011 and 03.02.2011

²² This would also explain why Bologna was not mentioned directly for example in the original Lisbon document (see above).

²³ Interview, 28.01.2011

²⁴ Interview, 03.02.2011

²⁵ Interviews, 28.01.2011, 02.-03.02.2011

was pointed out by one member of the commission himself.²⁶ As a consequence it appears that the influence of individuals is not to be underestimated as a result of this way of ‘negotiating’.

A central theme of the BFUG meetings are the country reports as part of the Open method of Coordination (OMC).²⁷ One commission member calls this the “new honesty”. This new honesty, or ‘name and shame’ how it is also sometimes called, seems to have its limits where “green is actually light green and where yellow is actually red”. None of the member states want to appear in a bad light and there are limits to how much one can criticise the self-description of the members in an intergovernmental, voluntary and cooperative process.

Such a situation implies that there are limits to the OMC in Bologna and a ‘name and shame’ approach. This stands in contrast to the Lisbon strategy where such an approach is demanded from the Commission.²⁸

Despite this and other differences between Bologna and Lisbon the interviewees point at the shared objectives of both processes which for them are more dominant than the differences. One senior official of the Commission views Lisbon and Bologna as sharing a mutual basis which is like “playing chess on different boards at the same time”.²⁹ For another member it does not matter whether the ‘envelope’ is called Bologna or Lisbon. It is the content that matters and some aspects, like the PhD, fits into both envelopes. The representative underlines the massive overlaps between Bologna and Lisbon by pointing at the role of the EU in general (and not just that of the Commission): the presidency of the Bologna process is the EU presidency, the EU troika is in the Bologna board.³⁰

These views combined with the perception of a former member of the Commission that Lisbon is the big matrix where Bologna fits in leaves little doubt about the applicability of the ‘Lisbonisation of Bologna’ analysis. Yet the argument somewhat implies the existence of a unitary actor, i.e. that the Commission is the same actor in Bologna and Lisbon. Whether this is the case will be the topic for the next section.

²⁶ Interview, 03.02.2011

²⁷ See also footnote 8

²⁸ In one of the key recommendations of the Kok report (see footnote 9) the report states: “The European Commission should deliver, to the Spring European Council in the most public manner possible, an annual league table of Member State progress towards achieving the 14 key indicators and targets. Countries that have performed well should be praised, those that have done badly castigated.” (High Level Group, 2004: 43)

²⁹ Interview, 03.02.2011

³⁰ Interview, 03.02.2011

3.3. – Who is the European Commission in European Higher Education?

As one interview partner put it, *the* state or *the* Commission is fiction. It is people who represent those institutions.³¹

There are many people working at the European Commission but when looking at the relevant DGs for the European Higher Education issue the amount of people is not so overwhelming. It is basically only two DGs (DG Education and Culture (EAC) and DG Research and Innovation (RAI)) that are responsible for Bologna and the higher education dimension of Lisbon/Europe 2020. While this limitation still implies the involvement of quite a few members of staff the interviews showed that actually only a few people are involved directly in the Bologna process – almost exclusively from the DG EAC. Or as one interviewee put it: The cook of the Commission for Bologna is DG EAC. On top of that, DG EAC is also responsible for the monitoring of the (higher) education part of the Lisbon agenda.

While the research part of Lisbon rests in the hands of also just a few members of DG RAI the modernisation agenda for universities (European Commission, 2006) of the Lisbon strategy was not only written within DG EAC but also by basically just two people according to one senior member of the Commission. As a consequence, everybody in both DGs dealing with the higher education agenda knows who is responsible for what. Under these circumstances there is no great need for a formal internal coordination. Or as one member of DG EAC describes it: “We are in close cooperation with our research colleagues. And we are aware of our respective agendas and priorities”.³² And a research colleague from DG RAI, in a different interview, underlines this by stating that the different entities within the Commission try to act as one as a result of interaction.

Combined with a flat hierarchy within the Commission, it leaves the individuals in both DGs with a rather great influence – at least when it comes to publications. Two of the interviewees pointed out that they were initially fairly surprised of how little some of their written work had changed after going through the various stages within the Commission.

Undoubtedly, the limited number of people concerned with the issue of higher education on the various levels opens up the opportunity for an impact of the individual actors which one might not expect in such a large and public organisation like the European Commission. Although it might serve the motivation of the people working there, it does not automatically

³¹ Interview, 03.02.2011

³² Interview, 02.02.2011

result in individuals trying to forward views that are not in tune with the Commission's positions (the above described internal cooperation might act as a counterweight and corrective).³³ Nevertheless, it underlines the impact this situation can have for the atmosphere in BFUG meetings where the highest representative of the Commission can make a difference in terms of the perception of the role of the Commission.

One long-time member of the Commission generally argues, also by referring to the actors outside the Commission, that Bologna is driven forward by only a few individuals potentially leading to a dangerous situation of a closed club trying to realise their ideas of what Bologna should stand for.

4 – The European Commission and Bologna: a unitary actor taking on a strategic role?

In many literature sources there seems to be an agreement on the importance of the Commission for the success and prominence of the Bologna process. For Barbara Haskell (2009) the entrance of the Commission into Bologna was one of the contributing elements to 'create strong results despite a weak process'. Ruth Keeling, analysing the role of the Commission in Lisbon and Bologna, argued in 2006 (216) that "the Commission is in many ways dominating the discourse, but it has also played a significant part in opening up the discussion on the challenges facing higher education on the European level". And for Amaral and Neave (2009: 287) Bologna provided "the commission with a heaven-sent opportunity to expand its influence".

The role of the Commission in Bologna is defined by various aspects on different levels. Some of them are:

- Institutionalisation: It seems to be undoubtedly the case that the Commission filled a coordination deficit by helping to institutionalise the process including the financing of actions and projects. And that brought some influence but not automatically domination.
- Institutional settings: The influence on a process is not only determined by institutionalisation as such but by the resulting institutional setting. As regards this aspect there are some substantial differences between the Lisbon setting and the Bologna setting

³³ As it seems to be that easy to identify who wrote what this could put extra pressure on the 'authors' to produce something that is somewhat in line with what is expected.

(Secretariat and BFUG). The resulting governance structures imply a much greater focus on cooperation in Bologna than in Lisbon (due to the direct involvement of stakeholders).

- Lisbon strategy: Lisbon is the “big umbrella strategy” including the EU agenda for higher education (and Bologna is part of this ‘sub item’)
- Subsidiarity: limits the competence of the Commission and its ability to influence policies on a national level (OMC is a result of that limitation). For one commission member subsidiarity highlights the tension between diversity and compatibility.³⁴ This becomes visible in the Bologna documents but even more so in the Lisbon papers.
- Common market: The common market provides some ground for the Commission to tackle some of the Bologna objectives (e.g. free movement of students and researchers, recognition of degrees) on the European level.
- Perception: As an bureaucratic institution that is above the national level and had to regularly interfere with the individual national interests, the Commission did not become ‘everybody’s darling’ or in the words of one Commission member: “We are not a sexy organisation. We don’t have an active promotion role”.³⁵
- Development over Time

While these aspects are of course not exhaustive they do already point at the difficulty of identifying and characterising the exact role of the Commission in Bologna.

In the eyes of one Commission member Bologna helped to advance the Europeanisation process also because of its non-binding nature. He emphasises further that the Commission in earlier attempts was not succeeding at EU level, this came only through Bologna.³⁶ This would imply that not only did Bologna need the Commission but that the Commission needed Bologna. On the other hand, though, and from a different perspective, one could also ask the speculative question of whether there would have been a chance for Bologna without the pre-existing EU?

From this point of view the Commission does what it is supposed to do: trying to advance the European integration process predominantly focused on a broadly defined economic dimension (reflecting the nature of the treaties of the European Union). And it has been quite

³⁴ Interview, 03.02.2011

³⁵ Interview, 02.03.2011

³⁶ Interview, 03.02.2011

successful in doing this by assuming an important role in the Bologna process and in European higher education more general.

Despite a bumpy start it has developed an overarching policy matrix for both, Bologna and the higher education part of Lisbon. European Higher education without the European Commission would hardly be thinkable anymore. Whether this also results in a dominant position determining the future direction of higher education in the EU and the Bologna countries cannot be answered here.

After all, institutions of higher education are still national institutions of particular cultural value with many missions. At the same time, the reference for their 'business' (students, degrees, research) is increasingly not the national (or even the regional) but the global dimension. And it is within this tension that the Commission tries to advance its agenda. With a handful of people, some power of the purse and in an atmosphere that requires some form of cooperative behaviour. The grand strategy has to be left to Europe 2020 where it is more acceptable and where it is more visible. But it is in Bologna where the Commission proved that it can play a pivotal role outside its jurisdiction within an intergovernmental process as part of a (very) general strategy.

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